

JUDAISM

HISTORY

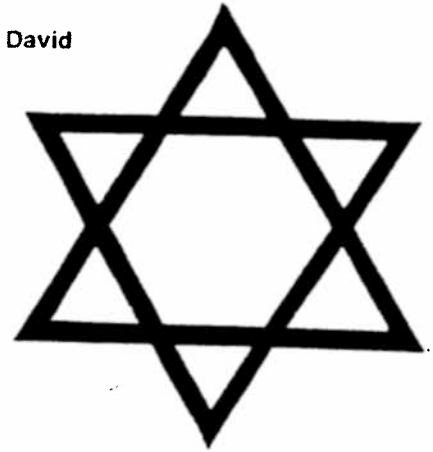
Judaism is one of the oldest religions in the world. A man named Abram, who lived around 1800 B.C.E. in a city called Ur in Mesopotamia (now Iraq), is considered to be the founder. In Abram's time, people worshipped many different gods. Abram, however, believed in one god, called Yahweh.

A story about Abram when he was a little boy shows that even then he questioned the common belief in many gods. At that time, Abram's father had a shop selling statues of idols representing many gods. One day when his father was away, Abram took a club and smashed all of the idols except the largest one. He put the club into the hands of the largest idol. When his father came home, he asked Abram what had happened. Abram explained that the idols had gotten into a fight. His father exclaimed that that was impossible. Abram agreed, pointing out how little power the idols had.

When he was an adult, Abram and his wife Sarai went to a place called Canaan. Yahweh made a *covenant* or *agreement*, with Abram. Abram would have many descendants who would live in Canaan, which they called the Promised Land (now Israel). Abram would remain faithful to Yahweh, and all of the male children in his family would be *circumcised* (have their foreskin ritually and surgically removed). Yahweh changed Abram and Sarai's names to Abraham and Sarah as a sign of the covenant. Many years later, though they were very old, Abraham and Sarah had a son named Isaac.

All of the people who have descended from Abraham through his son Isaac are known as Jews, after one of Abraham's great-grandsons, Judah. The Jewish people are also sometimes known as Israelites or Children of Israel, after

The Star of David



Abraham's grandson. Traditionally, everyone born of a Jewish mother is a Jew, whether they actively participate in the religion or not.

The Jewish people did not live in their Promised Land forever, as they had hoped. Around 1300 B.C.E. they had to move to Egypt in search of food during a time of famine. They became slaves to the Egyptian king, or *Pharaoh*. They were freed by a Jewish man named Moses, and again headed towards the Promised Land. The story of their escape from slavery is told in the book of Exodus in *The Bible*. They finally arrived and settled there, building a temple in which to worship Yahweh in the city of Jerusalem.

The temple was destroyed by the Romans in about 60 C.E. Since that time, Jews have built other places of worship wherever they go throughout the world. These are called *synagogues*. The temple has never been replaced, and some Jewish people are offended when the word *temple* is inappropriately used to describe a *synagogue*.

Jewish people dispersed to many parts of the world, especially in the Middle East and the eastern and central parts of Europe. Through the centuries, there have been continued

battles over possession of the territory that the Jews call the Promised Land, as many other ethnic and religious groups also have laid claim to the same space.

Many Jews moved to America as it was being colonized. The first Jewish congregation in America was founded in 1650 in New Amsterdam (now New York City). Many others followed, especially in the 1800's.

During World War II (1939-1945), over six million Jewish people, especially those in Germany and Poland, were killed by the Nazi forces. Others fled to the United States and other countries for safety.

A movement called Zionism, which began in the late nineteenth century, encourages all Jews to return to the Promised Land, present-day Israel. Many Jewish people dream of some day making their home there, if they have not done so already. Other people are content to live in other parts of the world and do not believe it is necessary for all Jews to return to Israel.

BELIEFS

Jews believe in one God, the biblical Yahweh, and in obeying the laws set down in the covenants that Abraham and his descendants made with Yahweh. Jews do not have a complex set of beliefs or creeds as many other religions do, but instead emphasize following the laws as given in the covenants.

In the United States today there are three main movements of Judaism. Orthodox Jews adhere most strictly to tradition, precisely following the rules that were set down in the *Hebrew Bible*. For example, they follow an exact set of dietary rules. They never eat certain meats, such as pork, and never eat meat products and milk products together, or even off of the same plate.

Reform Jews are less strict in their observances, and believe that following the spirit of the covenant with Yahweh is more important than following the particular rules set down at that time. An individual in the Reform tradition might choose to follow the dietary rules, but they are not expected to do so.

Conservative Judaism has elements of both the Orthodox and Reform movements, believing that the traditional laws have value but should be tempered by new ideas and practices.

CONCEPT OF GOD

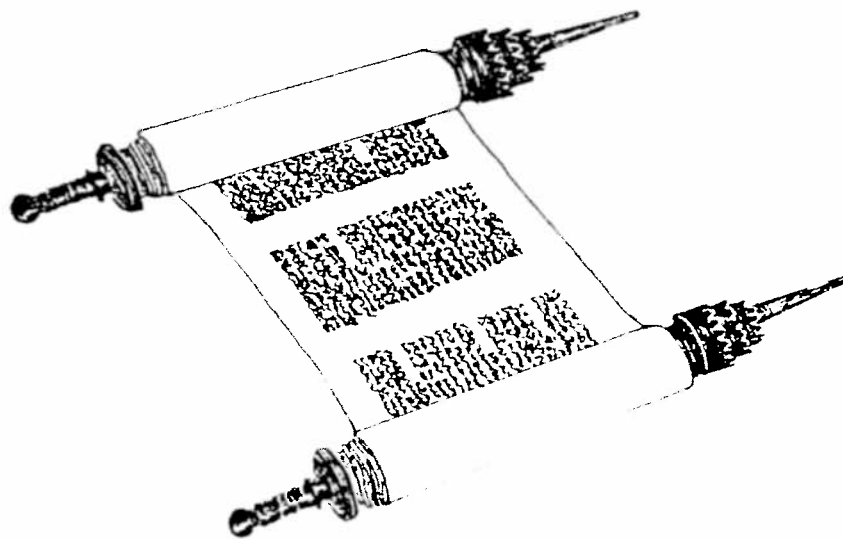
Judaism may have been the first religion to believe that there is one God who created the universe and continues to control it. Since Judaism teaches that all people are created in the image of God, they believe that everyone is to be treated with respect. Jews do not attempt to convert others to their beliefs, but they do welcome outsiders who wish to become Jewish.

SACRED WRITINGS

The *Hebrew Bible* (known to Christians as the Old Testament) is the foundation of the Jewish religion. The first five books of the *Hebrew Bible*, often attributed to Moses as author, are called the *Torah*. These contain the story of Abraham and his family, and the agreements set down in the covenants with Yahweh.

The other main sacred Jewish writing is the *Talmud*. It is a combination of two documents: the *Mishnah*, first written down in the second century C.E., and the *Gemara*, written down around the fifth century C.E., both of which are early commentaries on the *Torah*.

The prayer book used for Jewish worship is called a *siddur*.



The Torah

JUDAISM (Continued)

SYMBOLS

Judaism is often represented by the six-pointed star, or Star of David. This star is said to stand for the shield of David, an ancient king and important figure in the *Hebrew Bible*. No one is certain when the symbol was first used.

A portion of the *Torah* from the book of Deuteronomy is a very important part of Jewish symbols. The passage is known as the *shema*, from the Hebrew for the first word of the passage, *hear*. It begins, "Hear, O Israel," and continues by telling the people to keep God constantly in their minds and hearts, and to write it on the doorposts of their homes. Jews use very small, hand-written versions of the *shema* in two important symbols, the *mezuzah* and the *tefillin*.

In the *mezuzah*, the *shema* is placed inside a container and nailed to the doorpost in each room of a Jewish house. When a Jew enters the room, he or she touches the *mezuzah* as a reminder of the passage it contains.

The *tefillin* are small boxes or leather pouches which contain handwritten versions of the *shema*. Jewish men wear them on their arms during worship. A Jewish man also wears a *tallit*, or prayer shawl, and a *yarmulke* during worship. The *yarmulke* is a close-fitting, brimless cap that may be plain or embroidered with designs.

WORSHIP/SACRED SPACE

Some parts of Jewish worship take place in the home. However, the local synagogue is a place of worship as well as being a center for Jewish learning and a place of social gathering for the Jewish community.

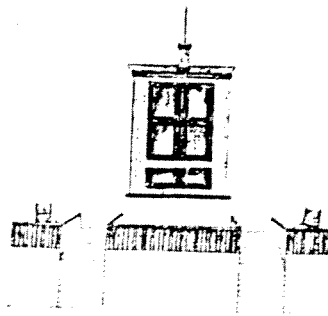
The *Torah* tells Jews to pray three times every day, morning, midday, and

night. At least ten Jewish men (Reform Jews also count women) must gather in the synagogue to form a *minyan* or *quorum* for worship. The service consists of the *shema*, blessings, readings from the *Torah*, and prayers.

The *Torah* used in the synagogue is hand-written on thin parchment paper, wrapped in velvet, and kept in a special cabinet called an *ark*. A candle known as the *Eternal Light* always burns in front of the ark. The *Torah* is read from a special platform in the center of the synagogue, called a *bimah*. It takes special training to be able to read from this scroll, because the *Torah* is written in Hebrew characters and, following ancient custom, vowels are not written down.

Worship is usually, but not always, led by a *Rabbi*, or teacher. If there is singing, it is usually led by a *cantor*. A lay person, called a *gabbai*, often assists with the worship service.

In Orthodox synagogues, worship is in Hebrew, the ancient language of the Jewish people. Women sit apart from men. In Reform synagogues, much of the service is in the local language. Reform Jews permit women and men to sit together in their synagogues.



The *Sabbath* is the weekly remembrance that God rested from creation on the seventh day (as the story is told in the book of Genesis in the *Torah*). Remembering the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments, a part of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. The Jewish Sabbath begins at sunset on Friday night and continues until sunset on Saturday. It begins with a

simple meal in the home. Before the meal, the mother of the family lights candles and says a blessing. Jews gather at the synagogue for Sabbath worship on Friday night and/or Saturday morning.

The Sabbath is seen as a day of rest, and no work is to be done. Orthodox Jews and some Conservative Jews take this very seriously, and will not drive a car, turn on a light, or answer a telephone on the Sabbath. Reform Jews adhere to the concept of rest, but do not restrict their activities.

Eight days after birth, a baby boy is circumcised in a ritual called the *brit milah*, and given his name. A baby girl receives her name during a blessing at the synagogue.

At the age of thirteen, a Jewish boy becomes an adult. He is old enough to read from the *Torah* during worship, and to be a part of the minyan. In an event called the *bar mitzvah*, his new manhood is honored. He plays an important role during the service, reading from the *Torah* scroll for the first time and often leading the whole service. Girls in the Reform movement celebrate a similar event called the *bat mitzvah*. In the Orthodox movement, the ceremony for girls is called a *bat hayil*.

HOLIDAYS/FESTIVALS

- **Rosh Hashanah** – the Jewish New Year festival, and the beginning of the High Holy Days, a ten-day period of repentance and renewal, which takes place in the fall.
- **Yom Kippur** – the last of the High Holy Days, also known as the Day of Atonement, when Jews seek forgiveness for things which they have done wrong.
- **Pesach** (Passover) – a spring holiday celebrating the escape from Egypt. It begins with a meal called the *seder* where the youngest child asks questions and the Passover story is retold.
- **Shavuot** (Pentecost) – a summer festival of thanksgiving for the *Torah* and the wheat harvest.
- **Sukkot** (Feast of Tabernacles) – a fall harvest festival.

- **Hanukkah** – (Feast of Lights) – an eight-day feast, usually held in December, which commemorates a Jewish victory in 163 B.C.E. Candles are lighted each night of the feast, in an eight-branched candleholder called a *menorah*. Hanukkah was traditionally a minor Jewish feast, but it receives more attention today in areas that are largely Christian because of its proximity to Christmas.



Tefillin

MEMBERSHIP/WORLD DISTRIBUTION

It is difficult to determine exact membership numbers for the Jewish faith, because everyone born to a Jewish mother is considered to be ethnically Jewish, whether or not they

practice the Jewish religion. It is estimated that there are thirteen to fourteen million Jews in the world. Almost half of these are in North America and about five million are in Israel and the Middle East. Others can be found in parts of Europe, Russia, Africa, and South America.

ORGANIZATION/HEADQUARTERS

Each Jewish synagogue is independent and not under the control of any central body. However, groups within each movement do loosely join together to form associations.

(Reform)

Union of American Hebrew Congregations
633 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10017-6778,
phone: (212) 650-4000
<http://uahc.org/>

United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism
155 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010
phone: (212) 533-7800
www.uscj.org/index.html

Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations
45 West 36th Street
New York, NY 10018
phone: (212) 563-4000
www.ou.org/



LESSON 3

1700
B.C.

586
B.C.

THE BEGINNINGS OF JUDAISM

READ ALOUD

"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." This short passage from the Bible expresses the basis of Jewish religious belief. In this lesson you will read about the great meaning it would have for the ancestors of the Jewish people in the changing world of the Fertile Crescent.

Focus Activity

READ TO LEARN

How did the writings in the Torah shape Judaism?

VOCABULARY

Judaism
Torah
monotheism
Ten Commandments
Sabbath
Diaspora

PEOPLE

Abraham
Moses

PLACES

Jerusalem

THE BIG PICTURE

Hammurabi ruled the Babylonian empire in the late 1700s B.C. Meanwhile people were on the move throughout the Fertile Crescent. Phoenician port cities along the Mediterranean Sea were expanding their trade with Egypt and cities across the sea. Merchants were traveling along the dusty roads that connected Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Some information about this exciting time comes from a source that millions of people continue to read today. That source is the collection of books known as the Hebrew Bible. Its original language was Hebrew. It has been translated into almost every language on Earth. Its writings are sacred to more than 17 million Jews today. Christians and Muslims also read and honor the Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrew Bible is the Jewish people's record of their history and their religion, which is called Judaism. In this lesson you will follow the Bible's account of Judaism's beginnings.

ABRAHAM OF UR

The first book of the Bible tells of a family that lived in Mesopotamia. This family came from the city-state of Ur. In this city people worshiped the Sumerian moon goddess. However, this family worshiped a different god. The Bible tells about a man named Abraham and his wife Sarah:

The Lord said to Abraham: "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. . . ." [So] Abraham took his wife, Sarah . . . and they set out for the land of Canaan.

The Covenant

To reach the land of Canaan from Mesopotamia, the travelers would have set out on the trade routes that linked major cities of the Fertile Crescent. Look at the map on this page to see their route. The journey would have taken months, and it would have been hard to be a stranger in a new place. When Abraham arrived in Canaan, the Bible says that God made a covenant, or special agreement, with him.

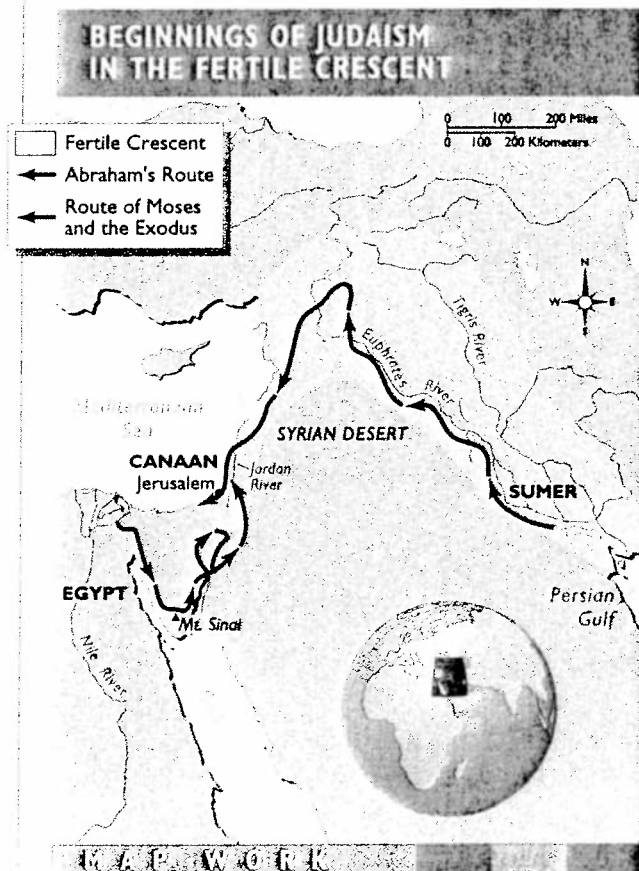
I am God Almighty. Walk in My ways and be blameless. I will establish My covenant with you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous. . . . I assign the land you sojourn [rest] in to you and your offspring to come . . . I will be their God.

This covenant is considered by the Jewish people to be the beginning of their history. Later, their descendants would become known as people of Israel, or Israelites, after Abraham's grandson Israel. They also came to be known as Jews.

Going to Egypt

As time passed, the Bible says, Abraham's children and grandchildren prospered as shepherds in Canaan. Then came a time of poor crops and terrible hunger. The people of Israel went to Egypt, where food could be found.

Here the people of Israel were welcomed. As time passed, things changed. "A new king arose over Egypt," the Bible says. This pharaoh "set taskmasters over [the people of Israel] to oppress them with forced labor." Like others in ancient Egypt, the people of Israel had become slaves.



Judaism has deep roots in western Asia, in the land along the Mediterranean Sea.

1. Abraham and Moses both crossed which river?
2. Moses' route passed a famous mountain. What is it?



MOSES IN EGYPT

Fortunately for the Israelites, a man named rose to leadership. According to the Bible, Moses was born to Israelite parents but was adopted as a baby by the pharaoh's daughter. Raised in the royal household, Moses experienced all the wealth and power of Egypt. Yet he would someday become leader and teacher to enslaved Israelites who lived all around him.

Becoming a Prophet

One day, the Bible says, Moses saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite slave. Moses looked around, and seeing no one about, he killed the Egyptian and hid the body in the sand.

Moses was wanted for murder by the pharaoh. He fled to the land of Midian, which was probably in present-day Saudi Arabia. There he remained for years until God called to him,

This family celebrates Passover by reading the Bible and sharing a traditional meal. The foods on the plate are symbolic of an ancient story.

"Come . . . I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt."

At first Moses protested, saying, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words. . . . I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." In the end, however, the Bible says, he obeyed God and made the long trek back to Egypt. Moses was now seen as a *prophet*, or a person who speaks for God. Moses walked the halls of the pharaoh's court once again. There he tried to convince

the pharaoh to free the Israelite slaves. Moses wanted to lead them to safety.

The Bible describes how Moses, with the help of God, led the Israelite captives from Egypt. To this day Jews celebrate the Passover festival each year to remember their freedom from slavery.

The Torah

According to the Bible, Moses led the Israelites into the wilderness of eastern Egypt. There they wandered for 40 difficult years. Early in their journey the Israelites traveled to a mountain called Mount Sinai. There, the Bible says, God gave Moses five books of laws and teachings. These five books are the first books of the Bible. In Hebrew they are known as the **Torah**, which comes from the word meaning "to teach."

Some of these laws are very similar to laws that were common in Babylonia. Like the Code of Hammurabi, for example, the Torah also had laws that forbade stealing and hurting others. In one very important way, however, the Torah was different. The God of the Hebrews forbade them to worship any other gods. This belief in only one God became known as **monotheism**. It set the Israelites apart from the other peoples living in the Fertile Crescent.

Among the laws that God gave to Moses at Mount Sinai were the **Ten Commandments**. These commandments became the core of the Jewish religion and teachings. In what ways do the Ten Commandments differ from Hammurabi's laws?



The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-14).

**I the Lord am your God. . . .
You shall have no other gods
besides Me.**

**You shall not make for yourself a
sculptured image, or any likeness of
what is in the heavens above, or on
the earth below. . . . You shall not
bow down to them or serve them.**

**You shall not swear falsely by the
name of the Lord your God.**

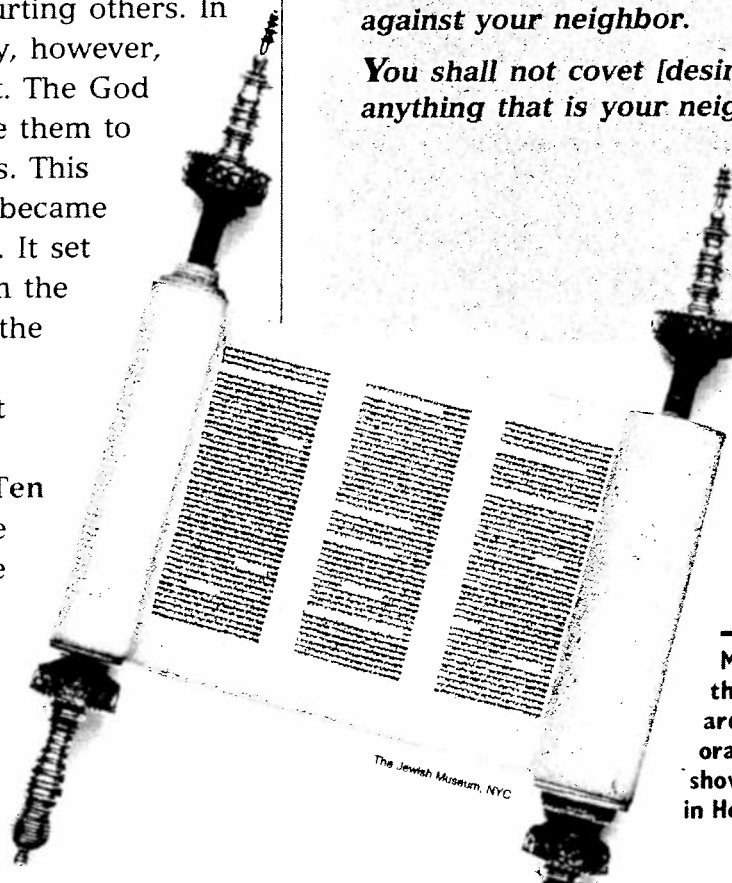
**Remember the Sabbath [day of rest]
and keep it holy.**

**Honor your father and your mother.
You shall not murder.**

**You shall not commit adultery.
You shall not steal.**

**You shall not bear false witness
against your neighbor.**

**You shall not covet [desire] . . .
anything that is your neighbor's.**



Many of the scrolls that hold the Torah are beautifully decorated. The Torah shown here is written in Hebrew.



Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and a religious center. Jews gather at the Western Wall to pray.

THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL

After 40 years in the wilderness, the Israelites prepared to enter Canaan. The Bible says that Moses spoke to his people one last time before he died.

This is the Instruction—the laws and the rule—that the Lord your God has commanded me to impart to you . . . so that you, your children, and your children's children may revere [worship] the Lord your God . . . to the end that you may long endure [survive].

The Bible says that after hearing Moses' final words, the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into the land of Canaan. There they defeated several kings and set up a nation of their own, called Israel. Now the Israelites were not only a people defined by their religious beliefs. They were a nation with a land, as well.

A Nation of Israel

For the people of Israel, the Torah was the basis of life and faith. It commanded people, for example, to "remember the **Sabbath**, and keep it holy." The Sabbath is the weekly day of rest, prayer, and study. It falls on Saturday. The instructions of the Torah reminded Israelites of their closeness to God. They continue to do so today.

According to the Bible, Israel became a powerful kingdom under the leadership of King David. He made the city of Jerusalem his capital about 1000 B.C. Jerusalem became even more important to Israel when David's son Solomon built a great temple there. Jerusalem became a center of both religious and political life.

Exile to Babylonia

After Solomon's death, about 928 B.C., the kingdom of Israel split into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom, Israel, was conquered by the Assyrians in 721 B.C. The southern kingdom was called Judah. This is where the name Jews comes from. The kingdom of Judah survived until 586 B.C. When Babylonian armies destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's temple, many Jews were led away to Babylon. This would not be the last time the Jews were exiled, or forced to leave their homeland. The scattering of the Jews to many parts of the world is called the *Diaspora* (di AS pur uh).

WHY IT MATTERS

Alas!

Lonely sits the city

Once great with people! . . .

Take us back, O Lord, to Yourself,

And let us come back;

Renew our days as of old!

These words from the Bible record the despair felt by the Jews. However, even in the Diaspora, many Jews would continue to live by the Torah. They would also remember the covenant described in the Bible so many lifetimes earlier.

A Jewish boy studies the Torah in preparation for his bar mitzvah. After this ceremony he will be recognized as an adult.

✓ Reviewing Facts and Ideas

SUM IT UP

- Trade and movement of people in the 1700s B.C. helped link major cities of the Fertile Crescent and Egypt.
- The Bible says Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and passed on laws from God regarding how they should live.
- Monotheism—the belief in one God—set the Hebrews apart from other groups around them.
- Sacred writings, called the Torah, form the heart of Judaism.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What role did Abraham play in the history of Judaism?
2. Why do Jews still celebrate Passover?
3. **FOCUS** How were Moses and the teachings of the Torah important to the beginnings of Judaism?
4. **THINKING SKILL** According to the Bible, what was the cause of the Israelites' move to Egypt?
5. **WRITE** Briefly compare and contrast polytheism and monotheism.

